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Climate: The Crisis and the Movement

An Interview with Naomi Klein

Wherein lie the roots of the climate crisis? Allen White, Senior Fellow at the Tellus Institute, talks with writer and activist Naomi Klein, author of the new book This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs the Climate, about how our economic system has driven us to the point of crisis and how can build a movement to confront the root causes of contemporary planetary perils.

A major theme of your new book is that resistance to the economic transformation required to confront climate change is the paramount challenge facing both the planet and the activist community. Why is that?

According to the analysis of the [Carbon Tracker Initiative](#), between now and 2050, we need to leave at least two-thirds of proven fossil fuel reserves in the ground in order to keep global warming below the widely accepted threshold of two degrees Celsius. If this occurs, owners of these reserves will have to sacrifice trillions of dollars in profits. The fossil fuel companies and their investors, who are counting on these profits, have a huge vested interest in blocking meaningful climate action and, as we have seen so far, the power to do so.

The attraction of profit in the short-term overwhelms longer-term considerations, even for the most “enlightened” of businesspeople. Look at Michael Bloomberg for example. He is often seen as among the most enlightened billionaires on climate change. He introduced climate policies when he was mayor of New York City, he has talked openly about the risks to business associated with climate change, and he backed the *Risky Business* report that outlined the huge economic impacts of inaction on climate change. But then, as an individual investor, Bloomberg invests substantial money in fossil fuels. Indeed, the investment firm created to manage his wealth *specializes* in oil and gas.

Is this dynamic unique to the issue of climate change?

We can see this economic roadblock in past social movements as well. In the struggles for

women's liberation, for lesbian and gay liberation, and for racial equality, the biggest wins were on the legal, electoral, and cultural fronts: improved representation in culture and the media, equal rights to vote, and equality under the law. Each of these movements also had a dimension focused on economic transformation, but what you see is a pattern of winning on the legal side, on the electoral side, and on the cultural side, but losing on the economic side because it presents the biggest threat to the status quo.

This pattern goes back to reparations for slavery—the great broken promise of abolition. As Martin Luther King, Jr., said many years later, the civil rights won so far were the rights that came cheaply. It is cheaper to desegregate a lunch counter than it is to bring good schools and good jobs to impoverished neighborhoods. We can see this dynamic in the women's movement as well. The battles for wages for housework and for counting domestic work as part of the economy are the ones we tend to lose. In the United States, even maternity leave is a struggle. What these all have in common is a diminished bottom line for the economically powerful.

This pattern became clear to me when I traveled to South Africa while writing *The Shock Doctrine*. One chapter in the book explores the economic losses in the aftermath of the end of apartheid. I saw this as an example of the shock doctrine—the shock of liberation—because it created a major disruption for people's lives and marked a moment for a small group of South Africans to consolidate wealth. The economic side of the liberation project, which was to nationalize the mines and banks in order to have the resources to invest massively in improving conditions in the townships, was essentially abandoned by the African National Congress once it took power. It is a tragic story because economic inequality is deeper in the post-apartheid era than it was before, despite the enormous gains in democracy and equality under the law.

In discussing these economic roadblocks in your book, you identify neoliberal economics and an extractivist mindset as the root causes of the crisis. How do you define these?

If we are talking about root causes, I would certainly point to extractivism, a violent relationship to the planet based on dominance. It is a mentality that says we can take and keep taking without limit and never give back, one that inevitably obstructs natural cycles of renewal.

The spread of this mindset goes back to the era of European imperialism, with its sacrifice zones of resource extraction that fed the powerful centers of commerce. And it was taken to a completely new, hegemonic level with the rise of coal and the Industrial Revolution. Our drive to mine and drill and now to frack, creating ever more sacrifice zones and disposable communities along the way, certainly goes much deeper and farther back than the neoliberal form of capitalism we have now.

I wouldn't say that free-market ideology is a root cause of the crisis, but it has played an absolutely crucial role in bringing us to the edge of the climate cliff. With global warming, we have seen an epic and tragic case of bad timing: the moment when the crisis was dropped in our

laps was precisely the moment when the neoliberal project had declared victory, that there was no alternative to its program of deregulation, privatization, and slashing the public sector. Politics was now exclusively about unleashing the power of unfettered markets and unrestricted private wealth, and the very notion of collective action to further the public good had fallen completely out of favor. It is the single biggest reason we have seen such little progress on climate, because the obvious solutions—cracking down on corporations, planning our economies—are seen as impossible by the political class.

We frequently hear terms like “sustainable capitalism, “green capitalism,” “breakthrough capitalism,” and “Gaia capitalism.” Are these worthy alternatives to capitalism as we know it or decorations on a fundamentally flawed system?

People put forward these dreams periodically, and some can make sense on paper. But, once again, the entrenched interests and hyper-profitability of the current system block any possibility of the necessary economic transformation. Whenever I encounter these concepts, I always wonder how their proponents plan to get from our current system to these supposedly enlightened systems with their “triple bottom line,” their correct price signals, and their valuing of nature. What is the theory of change? We have been hearing about ways to transform capitalism from the inside for a long time, yet the ecological degradation and economic inequality produced by capitalism have only gotten more brutal.

I can certainly imagine an economic system in which markets are not at war with life on Earth. But whether that should rightly be called capitalism is another question entirely. Many people seem to be deeply invested in preserving the capitalism brand. We are stuck in this dichotomy that if it’s not capitalism, then it must be state socialism. But it could be something else entirely: a system that starts with the fundamental imperative to protect and renew life on earth, whether that is the right of all people to have enough for a good life or the right of natural systems to regenerate and not be depleted out of existence.

At the UN Climate Summit in September, I spent a day in the Private Sector Forum. The UN was very proud of the record number of CEOs present at the meeting. These business leaders waxed on and on about how they were going to be the ones to solve the climate crisis. They blamed governments for not doing anything, fully impervious to the fact that have been part of a successful counter-revolution—some of them spearheading it—to render our governments as weak as they are. The dissonance was astounding.

In my breakout session, our question was “What is the one thing governments can do to fight climate change, and what is the one thing that corporations can do?” I raised the question of whether or not governments could regulate corporations to require environmentally sustainable behavior. And the response was “Well, that’s not possible anymore. We’ve tried regulation, and it doesn’t work.” I also suggested that it was important to reduce the power of corporate money

in politics. If the problem is that governments are weak, here is a way to help them get stronger. That, too, was dismissed as entirely out of hand.

You argue that we need bottom-up change. What would such a dispersed, distributed movement look like, and how likely is it to emerge?

The challenge we face is how to organize out of the rubble of neoliberalism. How do we organize without the institutional supports that our predecessors had? Many of us don't have jobs to unionize. We have contracts, we are hyper mobile, and we are very hard to organize. The paradox of new technology is that we are easier to find than ever before but much harder to organize in a sustained way.

We see flash movements again and again, ones that burn brightly and quickly burn out. I have been a part of some of these, including the so-called anti-globalization movement and, in a more peripheral way, the Occupy movement. And I think we all understand now that sustaining a movement without a fixed address is a big challenge.

The NGO model—hopping from campaign to campaign and focusing on providing “deliverables” for funders—has also been a corrosive factor to building sustained movements. In the United States, on the right, you have funders who take ideas seriously and very consciously funded an ideological counter-revolution. Liberal donors like George Soros and the Rockefellers are often treated as the antithesis of right-wing donors like the Koch brothers. However, these donors and their foundations tend to be allergic to funding big ideas and structural change, let alone anything that consciously identifies as the left, in favor of time-limited, issue-specific campaigns. There are exceptions, but few and far between. So we have campaigns and issue-based groups, punctuated by brief periods of inter-movement convergence.

If the current model of movement-building is broken, what is needed to replace it?

Coalitions needed to build a broad-based social movement are not going to be funded in the way that the left in the United States is currently funded. Historically, there have been important relationships between trade unions and social movements, a relationship we need to revive. That means overcoming the tired dichotomy that pits jobs against the environment and, instead, bringing whole communities together to map what a real justice-based climate transition would look like—and then fighting for it. Such efforts need to go beyond mere lip service for green jobs and really hash out a vision and program for the next economy. Will public transit be free? How many jobs will it create? Where will the money come from?

We also need to revitalize membership-based organizations and create new ones, and we need to democratize our movements so that there is a system of accountability in place. Right now, after the People's Climate March in New York, there is nothing to prevent a slick green NGO from attempting to harness all that power in the streets, meeting behind closed doors with politicians, and saying, “Well, what this movement wants is fee and dividend.” Is it? Did anyone

ask? The march was about more than just climate action—it was about climate justice. One of the most noteworthy aspects of the march was its racial and economic diversity. And a lot of what was driving that was the hope of climate action representing a real investment in some deeply neglected communities and the possibility of jobs and infrastructure. If you give all the money back from a carbon tax, you no longer have any left to invest in these neglected frontline communities.

You are particularly critical of the large environmental organizations. Why?

Not all of them, and I also work with many of them. I am on the board of 350.org. I have addressed the staff of Greenpeace International. Amazing Sierra Club staff members are featured in our upcoming documentary film. I have huge respect for Friends of the Earth and Food and Water Watch. But I do point out that the environmental movement is not a social movement like the civil rights movement and the labor movement, which relied on large numbers to offset their shortcomings in political and economic power. The roots of conservationism in the US are very elite; one of the primary catalysts was the desire among the affluent to protect wilderness spaces for recreational purposes. This is still reflected in the approach some of the richest green groups take to coalition-building: their first coalition targets are usually big business—so-called “partners”—and even the military.

It is important to understand that these elite coalitions can and do come at the expense of other coalitions, ones that are not sought. The climate movement’s most natural allies—the people who have the most to lose from inaction because they are on the front lines of fossil fuel extraction and combustion—are too often never invited, or invited in ways that are perfunctory or seem disingenuous. There is a long and bitter history between the environmental justice movement and some of these big green groups, and these battles are being fought again and again. Real progress is being made in parts of the movement, which we saw during September’s People’s Climate March. But we also have to recognize that parts of the environmental movement do not stand in opposition to the status quo; on the contrary they are deeply invested within it. That means there are real limits to the scale of change they will support, even when science demands it.

What is needed to shift advocacy from specific issues and mainstream strategies to acting and thinking more systemically and structurally?

We will not win any of this unless we engage in a deep battle of worldviews. Progressives have lost so much ground over the past forty years. Particularly within the climate movement, so much effort has gone into positioning climate action as unthreatening and compatible with the free market worldview.

That is why I think it cannot be just a call for climate action—it has to be a call for climate justice. We need to be clear about the values and principles that underpin our demands. We need a polluter-pays framework so that those most responsible bear the cost. At the same time, those

who have been most victimized by our current toxic economy have to be first in line to benefit from the next economy. That is not only just, but also strategic—since the people with the most to gain will fight hardest.

We need to work on elevating those parts of ourselves that value quality-of-life rather than economic enrichment. Green groups, unfortunately and perhaps unknowingly, reinforce the neoliberal view that we are first and foremost consumers by focusing their efforts on telling people what to buy and where to shop. We need to emphasize the parts of ourselves that love nature, our families, and our communities, and we need to rediscover our identities as active community members and engaged workers, not just consumers.

Are your critiques and solutions equally applicable to the Global North and Global South?

We have a collective global climate crisis and will need a collective global response. What brought me to this issue was having the concept of climate debt explained to me by Bolivia's trade negotiator. If we are to take climate change seriously, we would have to tackle North-South inequality, including transfers of technology and wealth to heal the festering wounds of political and economic colonialism.

Anybody who has been to a UN climate conference knows that this is the issue over which the talks repeatedly break down. The Global North has been emitting carbon for over two hundred years more, and the impacts are being felt overwhelmingly in the Global South. Absent acceptance of this reality, stalemate will continue.

Latin America offers a glimpse of a path forward. The discourse around anti-extractivism and the rights of nature emerged from indigenous-inspired movements in Bolivia, Ecuador, and Brazil. Pitched battles are ongoing between traditional development-oriented leftist governments and massive social movements disillusioned with decades of neoliberal policies.

On the other side of the Pacific, China's relentless drive for economic growth, spurred by trade globalization and low-cost labor, has taken a devastating environmental toll on both cities and the countryside. Here, we are afraid to talk about growth because it is seen as untouchable. Everybody is pro-growth. But in Beijing, people are choking on growth. The government is now reducing growth projections and committing to cap its coal use as the environmental costs of unbridled economic expansion become increasingly evident and severe.

We have to build stronger alliances globally so that we can strengthen those forces that have another vision, a non-extractivist vision, of the good society. We need to see the response to climate change as not just an issue, but as a frame that permeates the struggle for all forms of social justice.

Your new book cites the “Great Transition” scenario as a plausible and desirable alternative that would address the ills of free market capitalism. What is the role of such a vision in mobilizing change?

I cite the Great Transition research in the context of a discussion of capitalism’s growth imperative and the fact that the only breaks from the mindless growth juggernaut have been economic crises. Avoiding those extremes requires that we very carefully plan the economy, something I have started calling a “deliberate economy.” People need to know that moving away from our obsession with GDP growth does not have to mean deprivation and suffering; on the contrary, the “managed degrowth” model means putting our well-being, health, and leisure time back at the center of our economic lives and aspirations. The idea of a Great Transition, along with much other inspiring work coming out of the New Economy movement, expresses that optimism beautifully.

More broadly, there is a desperate need for the different coalitions of the left to get far more engaged with climate change, because this crisis really forces us to decide what kind of societies we want and puts us on a firm, science-based deadline. And that makes it a unique and powerful opportunity.

The world’s social movements need to work together under a common banner to fight climate change. And we certainly need smart frameworks for thinking and talking about the diverse set of solutions that we know can tackle the crisis—from invoking the polluter-pays principle to divert fossil fuel profits into the green transition, to building decentralized, community-owned solar and wind systems, to reining in financial speculation—and making sense of the world that they are already helping us build. Again, I don’t think it is going to be capitalism. But this also isn’t about devising and imposing some kind of one-size-fits-all economic system on the globe, so the emphasis on the creative power of the “transition” itself is especially important.

About the Interviewee



Naomi Klein is an award-winning journalist, syndicated columnist and author of the international bestsellers, *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* (2007) and *No Logo* (2000). She is a columnist for *The Nation* magazine and the *Guardian* newspaper, a contributing editor at *Harper's* magazine, and a Puffin Foundation Writing Fellow at The Nation Institute. She serves on the board of directors for 350.org, the global grassroots movement to solve the climate crisis.

Her critically acclaimed new book, *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs the Climate*, is the 2014 winner of the prestigious Hilary Weston Writers' Trust Prize for Nonfiction. It has been named to multiple Best of 2014 lists, including the *New York Times* 100 Notable Books of 2014. An instant *New York Times* and international bestseller, *This Changes Everything* is being translated into over 15 languages.

About the Publication

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